

International

Cave rescue highlights plight of Thailand's stateless people

Thousands of stateless people live trapped between countries

MAE SAI: On the Thai side of the mountainous border with Myanmar, where 12 boys and their football coach were rescued from a flooded cave last week, thousands of stateless people live trapped between countries with no access to some basic rights. All of the boys and their 25-year-old coach, who make up the 'Wild Boars' soccer team, will be discharged from hospital next week following a three-day rescue that evoked international relief and joy. Although the Wild Boars are now viewed in this Southeast Asian country as national treasures, four of them are technically stateless. At least two of the boys, however, are already in the advance stages of obtaining citizenship.

"I feel very good that the Wild Boars cave story has put a spotlight on this issue," Tuanjai Deetes, Commissioner of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand said. "We must put more emphasis on this domestically as well as internationally. There are still many stateless people." According to official statistics, 486,440 people are registered with the Thai government as stateless, of whom 146,269 are - like three of the Wild Boars - under 18 years old. There are several groups whose people have over generations moved around the region, across open borders in remote hills between southern China, Myanmar and Laos, and into northern Thailand's ethnic patchwork of communities.

The blurry-border province of Chiang Rai, at the northern tip of Thailand, has long been an entry point for illegal migrants, people smuggling and drug trafficking from the 'Golden Triangle' area that straddles Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. But it is the better economic conditions in wealthier Thailand that have most attracted families from the other side of the border. Once in Thailand, they are eligible for basic education and healthcare but face travel restrictions,

and have no access to financial services, and cannot get married or buy property.

"Whilst some progress has been made, stateless people in Thailand continue to face challenges accessing some of their basic rights," said Hannah Macdonald with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "Examples include restrictions on their freedom of movement, healthcare, access to financial services, being able to get married, and to own property or land." Somsak Kanakham, chief of the district office in Mae Sai, the area within which the boys were trapped in the cave, said his office was ultimately just following Thai law. "I understand why on human rights grounds we all want to resolve this issue," he said. "But it's a matter which concerns national security."



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'Major challenge'

The number of people in limbo is understated by the official data because many have not yet

registered as stateless. In the Mae Sai district alone, there are more than 27,000 pending cases of stateless people who have applied for Thai citizenship. "The last time the government surveyed this village was in 2011. Now there are more than 210 new people," Tuanjai told Reuters in the village of Prachao Tum Jai, 8 km from the cave, where around 400 people of the "Dara-ang" hill tribe live.

Most of the villagers, who make a living by growing pineapples and rice, do not have Thai citizenship, and over 200 are not even registered as stateless, Tuanjai said. "The major challenge is the migration pattern. There is a lot of movement, and a lack of information about the registration process." Stateless people who can prove they have lived in Thailand for at least 10 years can apply for citizenship, which then takes around six months to process, said Vitat



CHIANG RAI, Thailand: This combo of video grabs shows rescued 'Wild Boars' football team members recovering at the hospital in Chiang Rai province. — AFP

Techabun, director-general of Thailand's Department of Children and Youth.

But Tuanjai says "exploitation by officials" who demand bribes to facilitate citizenship applications has sometimes stood in the way of this process. Mae Sai district chief Somsak Kanakham said his office has partnered with civil society groups on the issue to ensure more transparency and combat corruption. The Wild Boars' coach, 25-year-old Ekkapol Chantawong, is a member of the Tai Lue minority, one of several groups in the region. He hopes to become a Thai citizen, a friend and relative told Reuters last Thursday.

Tarn Aree, 35, another stateless Tai Lue who lives in the town of Chiang Rai, and her son are struggling to obtain citizenship. Despite her son's age, 11, he has the same technical status as a "migrant worker", meaning he is officially living in Thailand, the country of his birth, temporarily. "Many of us have been applying for citizenship for years but we haven't got it," said Tarn as she queued with friends for free bags of rice at a fair hosted by a Buddhist temple. "We can't technically buy land so we need to use other people with Thai citizenship to buy land for us," she said. "I just want my son to truly own our home". — Reuters

Death toll rises as Nicaraguan violence rages

MANAGUA: Nicaraguan forces on Friday attacked a university in the capital Managua and a neighborhood in opposition bastion Masaya, killing two in the latest violence to convulse the Central American country hit by months of unrest. Political tensions have soared since protests against a now-aborted pension reform began on April 18 and mushroomed into general opposition to President Daniel Ortega and his government. Friday's attacks came as Ortega called for peace during a day of strikes, the second in three months of anti-government protests that have left over 270 dead.

Two people were killed when government forces opened fire on the combative neighborhood of Monimbo, south Masaya, as Ortega and his supporters began a procession from the capital to the opposition stronghold, 30 kilometers south. One was a policeman, a local rights group representative told AFP. The march was to celebrate the June 1979 "retreat" that saw thousands of guerrillas withdraw from Managua to Masaya to regroup, before securing victory on July 19 when president Anastasio Somoza fled the country. On Friday, protesters erected barriers

and vowed to prevent the former leftist guerrilla's procession from passing through. It was delayed and limited to a driven caravan.

But where Ortega was once hunkered down with allies in Masaya fighting against a dictatorship, the 72-year-old head of state now is now the one hated in the rebel heartland. In Masaya, Ortega accused the opposition of acting "with venom and hate," and appealed for a return to "the road of peace." Elsewhere at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua, where students have been holed up since protests began, a medic reported several injuries after pro-government forces opened fire. "They all came with firearms, they came to kill," one young person told reporters from a church near the university.

Second strike

Meanwhile, banks, markets, gas stations, schools and shops kept their doors locked among deserted streets as Nicaragua's opposition staged a 24-hour general strike on Friday, a day after five people were killed in violence surrounding anti-government protests. Opposition supporters claimed the strike was 90 percent respected across the country while official media announced business as usual in several trade zones. In cities such as Leon and Granada, only state-owned Petronic gas stations remained open.

Mercedo Oriental, one of the biggest trade centers in the capital Managua with 20,000 businesses,

was almost entirely shuttered. "I'm working out of necessity but the strike is a weapon to put pressure on the government because there is no end in sight to this situation," Adolfo Diaz, a 67-year-old shoe shiner, told AFP while sitting alone in a hall at the Huembes market in the east of Managua, normally a bustling hub of some 4,500 businesses. The strike, called by the opposition Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy grouping, came after four police officers and a protester died on Thursday as clashes erupted between opposition activists and government forces and their paramilitary allies in the southeast town of Morrito.

'Terrorist' arrested

On Friday, police arrested opposition leader Medardo Mairena, accusing him of being a "terrorist" and having "organized" and "ordered" the "attack" against the murdered police and protester. The opposition Civic Alliance denounced Mairena's detention as an "act of intimidation." The opposition is demanding either early elections or the resignation of Ortega and his wife Vice President Rosario Murillo, accusing both of corruption, despotism and nepotism. But while the will was there to support the strike, not everyone has the means to do so. "If I don't work, I don't eat. It's not a question of not supporting the strike but one of supporting our families. We need this to end so we can work," said 56-year-old cobbler Nestor Larios. — AFP

Hospital overflows after Pakistan blast

QUETTA: Survivors of a suicide blast which killed 128 people as it ripped through a crowded Pakistani rally described scenes of panic and horror yesterday, as hospitals struggled to cope with scores of wounded. The attack in Mastung in southwestern Balochistan province on Friday, claimed by the Islamic State group, was one of the deadliest in Pakistan's history. More than 150 people were wounded when the suicide bomber detonated just as a local politician, Siraj Raisani, was standing to make a speech in a tent packed closely with supporters. He was among the dead.

"As he stood up, there was a huge bang," said student Rustam Raisani, who was part of the security arrangements and was standing on the stage behind the politician. "I could not see anything. There was only dust and the smell of blood and burnt human flesh. I could hear voices screaming. I tried to get up and I saw people who were trying to run towards the gate. They were trampling on dead bodies... Everybody was screaming." Raisani was speaking to AFP from the Civil Hospital in Quetta, where many of the survivors were taken.

The hospital was overflowing yesterday, with so many people crammed into corridors and relatives of victims sleeping on floors and in corners that it was difficult to walk through the building. Witnesses and emergency workers have described seeing the injured piled into rickshaws in a desperate attempt to get them to hospital from the town, which has no electricity and little in the way of medical services. In the ringing moments after the blast, survivors began to rush towards the exit, said witness Gulam Hussain, who

also spoke to AFP from his hospital bed where he was being treated for head injuries.

"They were stepping on those on the floor, he saw. "It was a sort of stampede... I started to pull some of the people and scream for help." Luckily, he said, others from the crowd realized what he was doing and began to help him pull the wounded out of the rush. The blast, the deadliest in a series of attacks that have killed 154 people in Pakistan in the past week, has dented optimism after the militancy-wracked country has seen dramatic improvements in security in recent years.

'Bad dream'

Analysts have predicted more violence ahead of an already-tense July 25 election, which pits the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother Shabbaz against cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. Smaller parties such as Raisani's local Baloch outfit are also contesting polls across the country, with activists calling on the military to provide greater security at campaign events. "(Raisani) had just begun when something hit me," Mansoor Ahmed, a 34-year-old activist with Raisani's party who also survived the blast, told AFP from his hospital bed.

"I could hear very faint sounds of people screaming, and (there was) blood and human flesh. It was like a bad dream." Another man had fallen on him when the bomb went off, he said. "When I pushed (him away)... a fountain of blood spurted out of my stomach." After that, he says, he could not remember much. The doctors have told him that ball bearings, which were packed into the explosives, had torn into his stomach. Ahmed said he did not know if the dozen or so friends that he attended the rally with had lived. "The doctors said I will survive," he said. "But I am not sure. Do you think I will survive?" — AFP



GAZA: Photo shows a smoke plume rising - following an Israeli air strike in the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah, near the border with Egypt. — AFP

Israeli air strikes hit Gaza after bloody border protests

GAZA: Israel's military renewed air strikes targeting Hamas in the Gaza Strip yesterday afternoon, following border clashes in which two Palestinians including a teenager were killed and hundreds injured. The army said it was "currently striking terror targets in the Gaza Strip", without giving further details, following an assault on the territory earlier in the day. According to Palestinian security sources and witnesses, fighter jets struck Hamas targets without causing any injuries. The Israeli bombardment came as rockets and mortars were lobbed into southern Israel from the blockaded Palestinian enclave.

Sirens warning Israeli residents to take shelter rang out in all areas bordering Gaza, the army wrote on Twitter. The escalation followed further protests on the Gaza border on Friday, in which two Palestinians were killed and more than 220 injured according to the health ministry in the Hamas-run Strip. A 15-year-old Palestinian was shot dead during the demonstrations and a 20-year-old died yesterday of gunshot wounds sustained during the protest, the health ministry said. The Israeli military said one of its soldiers was injured by a grenade.

Israel hits Gaza tunnels

Early yesterday the Israeli military said it conducted strikes against Hamas "in response to the terror acts instigated during the violent riots that took place along the security fence" on Friday. It also cited "continuous arson attacks damaging Israeli territory on a daily basis with the launching

of arson balloons from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory". In the morning raids Israeli fighter jets struck two "Hamas terror tunnels", one in southern Gaza and another in the north, as well as other infrastructure across the coastal territory. It said targets included "complexes used to prepare arson terror attacks and a Hamas terror training facility".

During the morning strikes, militants in Gaza fired a total of 31 mortar rounds at Israel, the military said, adding that six were intercepted by its Iron Dome air defense system. Israeli media reports said no one was injured in those attacks. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said the group was responsible for the mortar fire on Israel and that they were carried out "in response to the Israeli air strikes". "The protection and the defense of our people is a national duty and a strategic choice," Barhoum said.

Grenades and flaming tyres

Palestinians in Gaza have for months been demonstrating against Israel's decade-long blockade of the territory and in support of their right to return to lands they fled or were driven from during the war surrounding the creation of Israel in 1948. Since the protests and clashes broke out along the border on March 30, at least 141 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire. The majority were involved in protests and clashes but others were seeking to breach or damage the border fence.

No Israelis have been killed. Israel's army said grenades, Molotov cocktails, flaming tyres and stones have been hurled in the direction of its soldiers. Israel says its use of live fire is necessary to defend its borders and stop infiltrations. It accuses Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas of seeking to use the protests as cover for attacks against Israel. Hamas has run Gaza since seizing it from the Palestinian Authority amid deadly clashes in 2007. Since then, Israel has maintained a crippling blockade on Gaza which it argues is necessary to isolate Hamas. Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since 2008. — AFP

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